

Investigating Iraqi EFL University Students' Recognition and Production of Optional and Obligatory Grammatical Structures

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To master learning of any language, one is required to be acquainted with the four language skills and the language areas of that target language. Grammar, as an important language area is seen as the backbone of the language by which one can speak and write properly. Many EFL learners in general and the Iraqi ones in particular commit different mistakes in using optional and obligatory grammatical structures such as relative pronouns, since and for, subordinating that, that in reported speech, and the prepositions. One hundred and twenty Iraqi EFL university students have been chosen randomly to represent the sample of the study then they were exposed to a test of two questions; the first question measured their ability at the level of recognition while the second was intended to measure their ability at the production level. The results and the findings of the obtained data reveal that Iraqi EFL university students faced difficulty in this language area due to the high percentage and number of the incorrect responses which outweigh that of the correct responses. The results and findings of the study also reveal that Iraqi EFL university students faced more difficulties at the production level than the recognition one.

Key words: *Optional, obligatory, grammatical structures.*

Section One: Introduction

The Problem of the Study

The English language teaching process is revolving on the mastery of the two essential pillars namely: language skills and language areas. The language skills are: listening, speaking, reading and writing, and the language areas are: grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Grammar as an important area of the language is seen as necessary for the requirements of the language competence and performance. Lock (2002) states that the competence in grammar is the corner stone of the communicative competence on which the ability to communication is totally based. Nuttal (2000) also confirms that each one of the language skill focuses on an element and this element is in turn based on grammar. Therefore, grammar is an extremely effective factor for improving language competence. For Kohli (1999) grammar is considered an essential aspect in teaching without which a learner can't learn and practise a foreign language well unless acquiring knowledge of this area of language.

Batstone (1994) also asserts that "Grammar is a device for constructing and conveying meaning without which, effective communication would be impossible". Leech et.al (1982) believe that language core is grammar which relates the semantic with phonology. The main goals of learning the English language are learning rules of grammar. It can help students to raise their awareness of main ideas, exploring the structure of a text, as this seems to be crucial for best use of language (Richards and Renandya, 2002).

Most teachers think of grammar as a controversial topic since it involves many regular and irregular aspects of rules. These rules are problematic because they require much attention on the part of the teachers who have to teach these structures carefully and the students who have to learn and perceive them. One of these unexplored areas is the optional and the obligatory grammatical structures including: since / for, relative pronouns, prepositions, and the conjunction that Iraqi EFL university students are seen, after a long period of English language teaching and learning, are unable to use these optional and obligatory grammatical structures in their spoken and written English. They don't even know when and where they leave out these grammatical structures as well as they commit many errors in using them. Therefore, the present study is intended to investigate Iraqi EFL university students' recognition and production of optional and obligatory grammatical structures.

Aims: The present study aims at:

1. Finding out Iraqi EFL university students' recognition of optional and obligatory grammatical structures.

2. Finding out Iraqi EFL university students' production of optional and obligatory grammatical structures.

Hypotheses: It is hypothesised that:

1. Iraqi EFL university students are able to recognise optional and obligatory grammatical structures.
2. Iraqi EFL university students are able produce optional and obligatory grammatical structures.

Limits: The present study is limited to:

1. Optional and obligatory grammatical structures including “relative pronouns”, “that”, “since and for”, and prepositions.
2. Iraqi EFL 4th year university students / English departments/ the academic year (2019-2020).

Values: The Present Study is Valuable to:

1. For Iraqi EFL teachers to be aware of these optional and obligatory grammatical structures when they teach English grammar.
2. Applied linguist: to make use of these aspects of universal grammar that most languages all over the world share.
3. For translators to be aware of these optional and obligatory grammatical structures in translation.

Procedures: The following procedures are followed:

1. Presenting a theoretical background regarding some optional and obligatory grammatical structures;
2. Designing the instruments (tests);
3. Choosing the population and selecting a sample;
4. Gathering and analysing the obtained data;
5. Discussing the results, writing conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter One: Theoretical Background

This section is intended to explore optional and obligatory grammatical structures which are seen as noticeable sources of the difficulties encountered by the EFL learners in their recognition and production of these structures. These structures include: relative pronouns, subordinating “that”, “since and for”, and the “prepositions”.

Relative Pronouns

To introduce relative clauses, we usually use the relative pronouns which tell us more about the people or the things. (Murphy, 2012)

- (1) a. This is the house which he built.
- b. I know the man who opens the door.

The relative pronouns are used for two main reasons:

1-To add more information and to make persons and things clear when we talk about them. In this kind of relative clause we usually use “that” instead of “which” and “who”.(Ibid)

- (2) a. Aunt is the woman who discovered the medicine.
- b. This is the house which Jack built.
- a. My aunt is the woman that discovered the medicine.
- b. This is the house that Jack built.

2-We use the relative pronouns in order not to repeat words (subject or object) in this case we can save time, effort, and space in speaking and writing beside avoiding redundancy (Quirck, et al,1985)

- (3) a. Jane is the woman who (she) discovered the drug.

Types of Relative Pronouns

There are many types of relative pronouns which are used instead of or to replace: the object, the subject, possessions, and place or time. Table (1) below illustrates these types:

Table 1: Relative Pronouns and its Uses

No	Subject	Object	Possession	Place	Time
1-	Who (people)	Who/whom	Whose		
2-	Which (things)	Which	Whose		
3-	That (people and things)	That	Whose		
4-				Where	When

(Thomson and Martinent, 2001)

Optional and Obligatory Relative Pronouns

We can sometimes leave some of relative pronouns out which are called “optional relative pronouns” but other times we can’t do so and we call them “obligatory relative pronouns”.

1-Where and when: we can leave these two pronouns out without any conditions and with no differences in meanings :(Murphy, 2012)

- (4) a. Paris won the first prize in 1999. It was the year when we travelled to London.
b. I remember my twentieth birthday. It was the day when the war happened.
c. Do you remember the station where we fled the police?
d. Basrah is the city where Alsaib was born.

- (5) a. Germany won the World Cup in 1990. It was the year we got engaged.
b. I remember my twenty fifth birthday. It was the day the war happened.

2-Who / which / that : we can leave these relative pronouns out just when they are the objects of the sentence; in this case they are optional but we can't leave them out when they are the subjects of the sentence (they are obligatory) (Murphy,2012)

-who (people only/ subject or object)

- (6) a. John is the police man who arrests the thief (who = subject =obligatory)
b. John is the police man (who) I told you about. (Who is optional)

3-We can leave out the relative pronouns if the subject in the main clause is different from the subject in the defining relative clause.

The man you saw in the street is my relative. (The subjects are the man and you)

The pen he borrowed belongs to you. (The subjects are the pen and he)

But If the subject in the main clause and the relative clause is the same, we can't leave out the pronoun, because it is the subject of the relative clause.

The man who takes you to hospital is from England. The bag that is on the table is new.

In each sentence we have only one subject - the driver and the bag.

If the subject is left out, the meaning will not be clear.

The man takes you to hospital is from England. (There is no sense in this sentence.)

-Which (things or animals / subjects or objects)

- (7) a. This is the cat (which) eats the rat. (which =subject= obligatory)
b. This is the cat(which) I loved too much (which= object= optional)

-That (people / things / animals / objects or subjects)

- (8) a. she saw the boy (that) broke the window.(that= subject = obligatory)
b. she saw the boy (that) you hit for the broken window.(that = object=optional)

Since and For

Table (2) bellow sums up the main differences between “since and for”

Table 2: Differences between the Use of “Since” and “For”

Since	For
It is used for a starting point of time (since +a point of time)since (this morning , 2’oclock, 1999)	it is used for a duration of time (for a period of time) for six years , a week , a monthetc.
The time is definite	The time is not definite
It is used only with perfect tenses	It can also be used with simple past
It can be used with ing form since leaving school	It can’t be used with ing form
It is used as a preposition, a conjunction, and an adverb	It is used as a preposition

(Murphy , 2012)

Optional and Obligatory (Since and for)

1-We can leave “for” out with expressions like; all day, all my life, all the time, because of the impossibility of using it with these expressions:

- (9) a. They have waited here all day (not for all day)
b. She has lived here all her life. (not for all her life)

2-We can leave “for” out in some affirmative sentence but we can’t leave it out with negative sentences :(Ibid)

- (10) a. They have been imprisoned ten years .(with or without for)
b.They haven’t had fish for three weeks. (we must use for) (Murphy,2012)

Optional and Obligatory Subordinating Conjunction “That”

In fact, most English language learners are confusing to delete or don’t delete every “that” from sentences. Many learners wonder when they should omit the subordinating conjunction “that” in their written and spoken English. For example should they write “Sue said that it was jane’s birthday”or they just say “Sue said it was Jane’s birthday”? The answer to this question is that both sentences are grammatically correct but if we consider the principle of omitting needless words, you will be permitted to leave it out. Although “that” is optional in the forgoing example, we can’t do so wherever we see it because sometimes it is mandatory. On the other hand, it is optional keeping it and this is reasonable. (Eastwood, 1999)

Optional and Obligatory “that”

1-We can leave “that” out with the common verbs which are called “Bridge verbs” (verbs of speech or thought) such as; say , believe , claim , know , hear , think , etc. (Ibid)

Prepositions

There are many prepositions in English that are used for place and time. The use of these prepositions for place is dependent on the directions (surfaces) of that place for example on is used for one direction while in is used for four directions, while the use of these prepositions for time is also dependent on some criteria. Table (3) below illustrates these prepositions:

Table 3: The Prepositions of Time and Place and the Number of Directions

No	Preposition	Place	Number of directions	Time
1-	On	+	1	For days of the week
2-	At	+	1	For the time
3-	In	+	4	Months , seasons , etc.
4-	To	+	4	To connect time with another
5-	For	+	4	A period of time

(Quirck, etal, 1985)

Optional and Obligatory Prepositions

Prepositions, as one of the major grammatical areas, are problematic due to their optional and obligatory uses. Marianne and Diane (1999) classify prepositions according to two parts; must be used and deletion parts. They further divide the deletion of prepositions in to two types: optional and obligatory deletion. The following are the optional and obligatory deleted prepositions:

1-For: is optional when it is used to express a span of time:

(11) he has stayed here (for) 10 days.

2-On: is optional when it comes with days of the week and temporal nouns like: morning, afternoon, and night.

(12)He went cross-country swimming (on) Friday night.

3-TO \ at ... etc. are not used with locative nouns (place nouns) and verbs of directions and motion but prepositions are optional with sative verbs. Locative nouns are home, uptown, downtown, and overseas.

(13) a. She stayed (at) home. (optional)

- b. She went (to) home. (deleted / not used).

3-ON is deleted with expressions like: last, before, after, next, tonight, yesterday and obligatory deleted with a universal quantifier (all and every).

- a. They were busy (on) last Monday. (deleted)
b. I stayed in Paris (for) all week. (Marianne and Diane, 1999)

Table (4) below illustrates these optional and obligatory prepositions

Table 4: Optional and Obligatory Prepositions

Preps.	Optional deletion	Obligatory deleted
On	Express a span of time and with days of the week	Locative nouns follow verbs of motions or direction
For		
To	Locative nouns follow stative verbs	Noun phrases contain determiner like ; before , after , next , and last
At		
In		
from		

Chapter Three: Methodology

This section is intended to explore the procedures that have been followed to achieve the aims of the study and to verify the hypotheses. It gives a brief description about the subjects, the tool (test), and the selections of the materials of the test. The explanations of the test virtues will be explained in term of reliability and validity through using statistical means. Finally, this section will be concerned with describing the pilot and the main administration of the test and using the adopted scoring scheme.

Sample Selection

One hundred and twenty 4th year students from the University of Wasit / College of education for Humanities have been randomly chosen to represent the sample of the study. This sample of participants is intended other than any stages for many reasons. Firstly, they have studied grammar for four years. Secondly, they are more advanced than any other students. Thirdly, they have knowledge of many grammatical items. The number of the participants of both sections represents 100 % of the total number of the students in this stage.

Tools of the Study

In order to achieve the aims of the study, an instrument (test) is designed to measure the students' recognition and production of the optional and obligatory grammatical structures. The test includes two questions: the first one is intended to test the subjects' responses at the recognition level; while the second one is used to measure their responses at the production level. Each one of these question has 20 items. In the first question, the participants are required to decide whether the underlined grammatical words are optional or obligatory. While in the second question they are required to exemplify, i.,e., to give examples of these structures (see appendix 1)

Validity and Reliability of the Test

The validity of a test is defined as the suitability of the test and its items to measure the purpose for which it is intended. (Alderson, Clapham, & Wall, 1995). For Bell (1981) and Davies (1999), validity means test what you intend to test. To achieve the validity of the test of the present study, the questions are exposed to jury members of professors. Heaton (1988) states that the content validity is based on the analysis of the language being tested and the objectives of a particular course. Therefore, the items of the present test are proposed to have validity since they are designed to satisfy the items of the test. Moreover, the test is exposed to a jury of experts in order to assess its face and content validity. The jury members have approved the validity of the test.

Reliability on the other hand is defined as the stability of the test scores (Gronlund, 1976). Weir (1993) and Stiggins (1999) add that reliability is the consistency of the scores. A test is said to be reliable if it stays stable from one administration to another (Harris, 1969). Heaton (1988) says that different methods are used to estimate the reliability of a test such as test-retest, two equivalent forms, split-half, and Kurder-Richardson method. The reliability in this test is secured by using Kurder-Richardson.

Material Selection

Most of the test materials included in question one and two are taken from the three textbooks that Iraq EFL university students covered over the four years of study at the English department. These textbooks are as follows:

1. Grammar in Use by Raymond Murphy.
2. An Introductory English Grammar by N. Stageberg.
3. University Grammar by Randolph Quirk.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis, Discussion, and Conclusion

This section is dedicated to describe the procedures used to analyse and discuss the obtained data to arrive at the main findings. It also presents a number of conclusions basing on the results of these findings. This section is ended with a number of tutorial tips of recommendations for Iraqi EFL university instructors to improve the students' levels at the recognition and production of optional and obligatory grammatical structures.

Frequency and Percentage of the Iraqi EFL University Students' Responses to Question One at the Recognition Level:

The first question is set to measure the students' responses at the recognition level. The following table shows the frequency and the percentage of the students' responses to each item in this question see Table (5) below.

Table 5: Frequency and Percentage of the Students' Responses in Question(1)

No of items	No. of Correct items	Percentage	No of incorrect items	Percentage	No of items	No. of Correct items	Percentage	No of incorrect items	Percentage
1	52	43	68	57	11	55	46	65	54
2	35	29	85	71	12	32	27	88	73
3	44	37	76	83	13	28	23	92	77
4	54	45	66	55	14	60	50	60	50
5	41	34	79	66	15	26	22	94	78
6	58	48	62	52	16	56	47	64	53
7	37	31	83	69	17	52	43	68	57
8	46	38	74	62	18	33	27	87	73
9	48	40	72	60	19	61	51	59	49
10	35	29	85	71	20	47	39	73	61
				Total	20	900	37.5	1500	62.5

The results in table (5) show that:

The total correct responses according to numbers and percentages are 900 and 37.5 respectively while total incorrect responses according to numbers and percentages (including avoided items) are 1500 and 62.5, respectively. It can be concluded from the results presented in the table above that most of the students are unable to recognise the optional and the obligatory grammatical structures, since the percentage of the incorrect responses exceed that of the correct ones. Thus, the first hypothesis is verified because of the significant difference between the high percentages of the incorrect responses which outweigh that of the correct responses.

Frequency and Percentage of the Iraqi EFL university students' responses to question two at the production level

The second question is intended to measure Iraqi EFL university students' production of optional and obligatory grammatical structures. The following table shows the frequency and the percentage of the students' responses to each item in this question. See Table (6) below:

Table 6: Frequency and Percentage of the Students' Responses in Question (2)

No of items	No. of Correct items	Percentage	No of incorrect items	Percentage	No of items	No. of Correct items	Percentage	No of incorrect items	Percentage
1	23	20	97	80	11	23	19	79	81
2	33	28	87	62	12	40	33	80	67
3	43	36	77	64	13	39	33	81	67
4	52	43	68	56	14	26	22	94	78
5	41	34	79	66	15	27	23	93	77
6	25	21	95	79	16	41	34	79	66
7	35	29	85	71	17	53	44	67	56
8	46	38	74	62	18	50	42	70	58
9	39	33	81	67	19	49	41	71	59
10	20	17	100	83	20	60	50	60	50
				Total	20	765	31.9	1617	67.4

The results in table (6) show that

The total number and the percentage of the correct responses are 765 and 31.9, respectively while the total number and the percentage of the incorrect responses (including avoided items) are 1617 and 67.4, respectively. Therefore, the second hypothesis is verified i.e., Iraqi EFL university students are unable to produce optional and obligatory grammatical structures due to the significant differences between the two percentages; the high percentage of the incorrect responses significantly outweighs that of the correct ones.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that:

1. Iraqi EFL university students are unable to recognise optional and obligatory grammatical structures, since the number and the percentages of the incorrect responses exceed that of the correct responses in question one. Therefore, Iraqi EFL university students face difficulties in this language area.

2. At the production level, the findings of data analysis for question two show Iraqi EFL university students are unable to produce optional and obligatory grammatical structures due to the low percentages of the numbers of the correct responses.
3. The results also show that Iraqi EFL university students face more difficulty at the production level than the recognition one due to the high numbers and percentages of the incorrect responses at the production level which outweigh that of the recognition one.

Pedagogical Recommendations

Based on the findings and the results of the analysis of the data, the following are recommendations that can be summed up as follows:

1. Teachers have to put due emphasis on these optional and obligatory grammatical structures in their teaching of grammar because this area is almost forgotten by many EFL university instructors.
2. This topic is found at different positions in the textbooks of grammar and it is not well-covered and not well-located in the syllabuses and the prescribed grammar textbooks ascribed to EFL university students. Due to this fact teachers have to refer to these structures by reminding the students of these similar types of obligatory and optional grammatical structures. They have also to give the students much practice and drills to enable the students to competently master this area of grammar.
3. The results also show that Iraqi EFL university students are unable to use these optional and obligatory grammatical structures especially in the production test. Therefore, teachers have to devise types of tests that reinforce the students' ability to speak or write a piece of writing using these structures.
4. Al-Hamash and Younis (1985) state that materials of a foreign or second language should be recycled and reoccurred to retain these materials on the part of the students. Thus, EFL materials should be reappeared and recycled at intervals, as an essential topic as optional and obligatory grammatical structures must be kept and presented at regular and recurrent positions.
5. Syllabus designers and grammarians have to allot chapters to keep these optional and obligatory grammatical structures side by side to each other to secure the retention on the part of the students rather than keeping them separated from each one, since the significant presentation of these structures will help in learning them easily.

Since these optional and obligatory grammatical structures include different types of structures such as relative pronouns, that, since and for in reported speech, and the prepositions, EFL university instructors must list these structures in order to raise the students' attention towards these structures by exposing the students to extensive training.



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Appendix (1)

Q1-Decide if the underlined grammatical structures are **optional or obligatory**:

- 1-Have you enjoyed the birds that you bought yesterday?
- 2-I see the cat that ate the fish.
- 3-The woman who lives the next door is a widow.
- 4-The driver who takes you to hospital is from Iraq.
- 5-The car which is in the grage is Japanese model.
- 6-Iraq won the Asian cup in 2013. It was the year when I got married.
- 7-Did you remind the place where we stopped to take pictures.
- 8-The key which you lost open all the doors.
- 9-Have you seen the girl that wanted by the police.
- 10-She hasn't eaten fish for all her life.
- 11-They haven't visited me for three weeks.
- 12-The criminal has been injailed for twenty years.
- 13-She belived that I caused the accident.
- 14-He went to home after a tiring day.
- 15-I met her on last Monday.
- 16-He moved to down town.
- 17-They travelled on overseas looking for a better life.
- 18-Jane lives thirty miles from there.
- 19-The flowers are at upstairs.
- 20-He goes to Church on Saturday.

Q2-Exemplify two sentences; one the optional and the other with the obligatory use of each of the following grammatical structures :

- 1-"for" in a present perfect tense for a period of time.
- 2-Preposition (at).
- 3-Preposition (to).
- 4-Relative pronouns (who).
- 5-Relative pronouns (which).
- 6-Relative pronouns (that).
- 7-Suppordinating conjunction (that).
- 8-Preposition (on).
- 9-Preposition(in).
- 10-Preposition (from).